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ABSTRACT

The Carnegie Foundation commissioned a collection of essays as part of the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID). Essays and essayists represent six disciplines that are part of the CID: chemistry, education, English, history, mathematics, and neuroscience. Intended to engender conversation about the conceptual foundation of doctoral education, the essays are intended as a starting point and not the last word in disciplinary discussions. This essay explores the nature of graduate education in the humanities, the nature of needed reforms, and the idea of stewardship in the field. Broad topics include: the "messiness" of the humanities, the unity of the humanities, responsibilities and stewardship in the humanities, and questions for graduate programs in the humanities, such as, "Who should the next generation of students be?"; "How do we want them to learn and what do we want them to know?"; and "How are we to create academic citizens?" (Contains 39 references.) (EV)

CARNEGIE ESSAYS ON THE DOCTORATE

HUMANITIES



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WORDS AND RESPONSIBILITIES: GRADUATE EDUCATION AND THE HUMANITIES

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INTRODUCTION¹

In January, 1998, I took office as the graduate dean of arts and science at New York University, a private university. Shortly afterwards, I unexpectedly became co-acting humanities dean. For nearly two years, I found myself parked at the intersection of graduate education and the humanities. Trained in English literature, an early practitioner of women's studies, previously a graduate dean at a public university, long a participant in humanities organizations, I thought I had some understanding of the traffic patterns at this particular intersection. More fool I. I confess that I found myself thinking, more than once, that humanities are a mess—a real mess—a chaotic, irresponsible, and word-riddled demolition derby. On occasion, I even indulged in the "blank slate fantasy," capriciously dreaming of what graduate education in the humanities might be like if one could start from scratch, the scratch of a pen against a blank sheet of paper.

Crucially, the word "mess" has two great clusters of meaning. Both apply to the humanities. In one cluster, "mess" means bad things: confusion, muddle, spillage, dirt. But in the second, "mess" means good things: food, sustenance, a group of people sitting and eating together. The same contradictory meanings apply to "messy" and "messiness." On the one hand, "messy" and "messiness" can signify clutter and turmoil and disorder. But on the other hand, "messy" and "messiness" can signify a healthy complexity, which the constancy of change helps to create. In 1980, the report of a national Commission on the Humanities approvingly cited a lecturer who had declared that the humanities were a "mixed economy," with links to "reason, logic, and the systematic procedures of scholarship on one side; to the insights of imagination, intuition, emotion and fantasy on the other" (Commission on the Humanities, 15). In addition, the pre-conditions of creativity are often messy. Think of the apothegm, "You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs."

The humanities are at once a muddle and our sustenance, food for our minds and souls. One reason why my blank slate fantasies about graduate education were so capricious was my inability to write on a blank slate, to erase my long-held conviction that the humanities are food for our minds and souls. As fortunately, I was aware of individual humanists of brilliance, élan, and depth; humanistic work of insight, truth, and eloquence; and humanistic fields of energy and perceptions.

The hands of American graduate educators are plunged deeply into this mess with a double meaning. For graduate schools are a primary place in which advanced humanistic inquiry takes place, in which professional humanists do their work, and where the next generation of professional humanists get their training. The existing reform movements in graduate education—in graduate education in general and in specific disciplines—are inevitably influencing the humanities.² How far-flung that influence will be, and how it will shape

¹ The title of this essay comes in part from Adrienne Rich's poem *North American Time*.

² Literature about the reform movement in graduate education in general is now extensive. Of the various humanistic disciplines, the modern languages (through the Modern Language Association) and history (through the American Historical Association) have been notably active. In January 2004, the University of Illinois Press will publish a report of the American Historical Association's Committee on Graduate Education, "The Education of Historians for the 21st Century."

confusion and nurture our sustenance, depends in part on the wisdom of contemporary graduate educators.

THE MESSINESS OF THE HUMANITIES

All academic fields are, of course, full of conflict and change. They must be if they are not to stagnate and die. Individuals and fields grow and change.³ Expanding beyond their established borders, they disrupt existing taxonomies. (In the life sciences today, for example, graduate programs, drawing on the resources of several academic departments, do not always map neatly onto these departments.) External circumstances press down upon and reshape thought's formal, public contours. However, this flux in the humanities is more disagreeable to many than flux in the sciences or social sciences because of a pervasive belief, vocalized assertively during the culture wars, that the humanities should be a repository of unchanging, "canonical" values. A corollary of this belief is that the humanities must burnish and explore the good, the true, and the beautiful that are already there. Indeed, their very *thereness* is proof of their goodness, truth, and beauty. They ought not to be the consequence of a fallible process of incessant reinvention and discovery. A corollary of this corollary is that dramatic change in the humanities may prove to be corrosive rather than rejuvenating.

The humanities have also changed because of the ways in which they have partaken of the transformations of the American research university. Thomas Bender's essay "Politics, Intellect, and the American University" reminds us that immediately before World War II academic culture became far more secular. This meant that the hold of Christians had to be broken. For example, before World War II, no Yale College department employed any Jews. Symbolically, in 1936, Harvard altered its university seal, eliminating "*Christo et Ecclesiae*" but leaving "*Veritas*." Liberalization was a democratic good, but before its displacement, religion had "provided the moral authority and basis of cultural unity for higher education, even for the new research universities" (Bender, 12). Now other sources of authority and unity would have to be sought. One, which would inspire ambivalence in the humanities, might be objectivity and the scientific method. After World War II, United States higher education entered into what many now call its "Golden Age," a period of enormous institutional expansion and success, spurred in part by federal funding on university science and justified by an appealing rhetoric that linked democracy, freedom, growth, and education. The study of Western traditions was to strengthen democratic freedoms and to serve as an anti-fascist, anti-communist force. The academic disciplines were also redefined, but, as Bender writes, "increasingly became an end in themselves, the possession of the scholars who constituted them. To a greater or lesser degree, academics sought some distance from civics. The increasingly professionalized disciplines were....openly or implicitly drawn to the model of science as a vision of professional maturity" (6).

Then, in the 1960s, the humanities became strenuously, visibly, noisily, unusually messy – the consequence of the confluence of a number of well-known forces. Much of the unhappiness of the mess is economic in origin. In general, public financial support for higher education is far

³ See Hilary Putnam, "A Half Century of Philosophy, Viewed From Within," for an exemplary autobiographical account of intellectual change, here of a leading philosopher. Putnam's essay appears in *American Academic Culture in Transformation*, a collection of essays that are reliable guides to deep changes in 20th century American academic fields.

less robust and far more fragile than it was before the 1960s. More specifically, public and private funding for the humanities outside of higher education itself seems on a downward trajectory (D'Arms). Compounding this extrinsic difficulty, for over three decades newly-minted doctorates in the humanities have faced an academic job market so difficult that it is routinely labeled "a crisis." In 1980, the Commission on the Humanities was prophetically examining the crisis of the 1970s and then-nascent efforts to plan alternative careers for Ph.D.s. Its fourteenth recommendation was "that graduate schools and departments reassess their purposes and curricula, and consider how the training they offer in the humanities might be better adapted to both academic and non-academic employment" (88). The Commission's report explicitly linked such steps to the well-being of the humanities: "[Their] continued vitality...depends on the successful adjustment...to the job crisis" (90).

Any crisis has many interactive causes. So does the job crisis in the humanities. Loosely managed graduate programs enrolled too many students and graduated, eventually, too many doctorates. Perhaps more significantly, although higher education grew dramatically during the 20th century, undergraduates became less interested in liberal arts degrees. Academic democratization and the expansion of the liberal arts did not prove to be partners in a merger. Undergraduates majored instead in business (20 percent of all baccalaureates now); education; the health professions; parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness studies. In 1970, English majors represented 7.6 percent of all baccalaureate degrees; in 1997, 4.2 percent. The absolute number of English majors declined from 64,342 undergraduates to 49,345. Higher education needed fewer faculty members in many liberal arts fields (Menand). The faculty that were wanted were often for teaching service courses, remedial work in reading and writing and communications, not advanced seminars in Proust or meanings of the myth of Procrustes and his bed.

Perhaps undergraduates have voted with their feet because graduate schools have produced faculty members in the humanities who are far too arcane and specialized, who might know about the myth of Procrustes in one historical period but nothing about Proust. Or, perhaps undergraduates have acted as they have because of their experience of the humanities in high school. Or, perhaps undergraduates are unconsciously carrying on those grand American traditions of anti-intellectualism, philistinism, yahooism, and Babbitttry. Perhaps. But I find it even more likely that many undergraduates are being pragmatic, especially if they are new to the United States or new to higher education or new to both. To survive and thrive they must be economically secure. If a college certificate or degree is a credential that enhances economic security, and higher education has promised that it is, then get that certificate or degree in an area that has a demonstrable connection to a job or to a career.

The economic insecurity of the humanities has helped to generate a collective mood of anxiety, suspicion, and frequent depression, which graduate programs both embody and resist. However, even if the humanities were more economically secure, they would still feel overshadowed by the sciences and, to a lesser extent the social sciences – those disciplines that have assumed economic, social, and cognitive power in the modern world. In his important essay on the humanities, "The Sokal Affair and the History of Criticism," John Guillory analyzes the rise of the challenge of science to the 19th- and 20th-century humanities and the celebrated conflicts between humanists and scientists: S.T. Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle against Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill; Matthew Arnold against Thomas Huxley; F.R. Leavis against C.P. Snow (a novelist as well as a scientist). The humanists feared "much more

than the machine, regarded as the mere avatar of scientific or industrial civilization. [They]...went on to take utilitarian philosophy, instrumental reason, and ultimately reason itself as the objects of critique" (Guillory, 479).

In the contemporary university, humanists have an additional reason for their antagonism to science, a fear of the "scientific monopoly on truth...the fear that criticism will be relegated to mere *opinion*, a discourse that cannot claim to be knowledge" (Guillory, 479). According to historian Lynn Hunt, the self-justifications of the humanities in response to the sciences have been mutually contradictory. We can say that we are like the sciences, a science of man, the human sciences, and produce new knowledge, but if we do so, we empty the notion of tradition of meaning, and, commonly identified as defenders of tradition, are left holding an empty bag (Hunt, 10).

The comparative weakness of the humanities within the United States academy manifests itself everyday. The sciences and the social sciences are simply bigger. I recently gazed at a table of the production of Ph.D.s over the 5-year period from 1997-2001 in the arts and sciences, engineering, and agriculture, in which research is rapidly converging with the life sciences. The life sciences generated 29,274 doctorates; the physical sciences, mathematics, and engineering 55,816; the social and behavioral sciences 37,388; and the humanities (including history but excluding cinema studies and Italian) 23,458. Moreover, the sciences and the social sciences are richer than the humanities, a fact literally brought home every time a faculty member compares the salaries of professors in business, computer science, economics, and Slavic Studies, or a graduate student compares the fellowship stipends of students in chemistry and comparative literature, or radiology and religion.

Given such realities, the humanities may seem a reversal of the story of Cinderella, the abused stepdaughter who married the prince. In the early modern period, kings and princes and affluent merchants often reveled in the humanities. The humanities provided counsel, intellectual companionship, and guidance for a worthy, fluent public life. They dwelt in palaces and mansions. Now, for complex reasons, the humanities may no longer be the friends of kings and princes and affluent merchants and presidents. At best, they may be under the guardianship of the enlightened corporate executive or the wife of a powerful man. In brief, the humanities have reverted to the condition of being an abused stepdaughter, doing the household chores of Comp 101. When graduate programs accept this narrative of their plight, no matter how unconsciously, they inexorably salt the mood I noted above with pinches of self-pity, irritability, and anger at "them," be the "them" the administration, or the sciences, or "conservatives" or "capitalism."

However, size and power need not trump significance. Nor can size and power always batter down the smaller and less powerful. Since the 1960s, the humanities have shown intellectual and social growth. They have famously become more diverse, global (or transnational), and multiplicitous—in their faculties, students, areas of study, curricula, and methods.⁴ Those ideas lumped together as "theory" have forced greater self-consciousness about the nature of

⁴ One mark of this growing diversity: the Commission on the Humanities consisted of 32 worthy citizens, only 4 of whom were women, only 1 of whom belonged to an American racial minority. It would be astonishing if an equivalent commission, established today, were as lacking in gender and racial diversity.

humanistic work. A 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins University, funded by the Ford Foundation, on "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," was instrumental in establishing a significant cross-Atlantic traffic in concepts and intellectual personalities. "Theory" has proved provocative, for aspects of it undercut fundamental assumptions that the human person, the human subject, is the central figure in history, and that subjects share "universal" capacities and values. As the work of such thinkers as Michel Foucault became more powerful, "the human subject tended to disappear, trapped in existing 'epistemes' and external linguistic structures" (Bender, 26).

Mary Poovey, the literary critic and historian, summarizes the development of the academic humanities between the 1960s and the mid-1980s:

By 1985, a language that stressed universal values was no longer capable of attracting scholarly consensus or external funding. Throughout U.S. higher education, academic projects tended to be more specialized, in focusing more narrowly on specific problems; more theoretically self-conscious, in subjecting their methodologies to the kind of scrutiny associated with a heightened sensitivity to race, class, gender, and sexuality and with post-structuralism; and more product-oriented, as an expression of the speed-up of scholarly production the digital revolution facilitated (Poovey, 302-3).

This evolution has been morally admirable and academically important. Even the most hidebound of stodges among "traditional humanists" will admit that the study of African-Americans or of women is necessary; that human beings and groups have their differences; and that "The Other" must engage our respect. The study of marginalized and powerless groups has also tended to democratize the humanities curriculum and to restore "civics" to programs, albeit of an ardently progressive variant, a dislike for oppressive structures of power and hegemony, an empathy for the damaged and hurt and dominated. Significant though the evolution within the humanities has been, it has exacted mess-making costs. The return to a progressive civics, when unmoderated, has politicized departments. Next, if there is no human subject, where, then, are the humanities, the scholarship of the human subject? Finally, the multiplicity of areas of study and methods, combining with the post-World War II stress on specialization as a badge of professionalism, has fragmented fields. In a superb essay about changes in literary studies, Catherine Gallagher might have been speaking about the humanities in general. While useful, methodological flexibility, fluidity, and eclecticism dissolve any "underlying consensus about the general benefits that derive from unique specialization" (Gallagher, 151). More negatively, a fragmentation in which the parts lack a sense of the whole may lead to a situation in which the parts regard each other suspiciously and belligerently.

As the parts quarrel amongst themselves, outside observers, who might once have found the scene interesting, wash their hands of the whole affair.⁵ The politics, the anti-humanism, the language of theory (unfairly maligned), the fragmentation — none of this helped to build bridges between the academic humanities and large sections of the "educated public." This permitted the humanities to become easily enmeshed in the "culture wars," which began in the 1960s and were fought most ferociously over the arts and humanities during the 1980s and their conservative Republican presidencies.

⁵ I am paraphrasing Franklin, 218.

As I have written elsewhere, the contemporary roots of the culture wars were in the 1960s. They were fought over four, great linked issues: the nature of the United States and its role in the world, a passionate dispute which the Viet Nam War violently provoked; race and racial discrimination; gender and gender discrimination; and sexual norms. Higher education was prominent in the culture wars, "at once a source of dissent and experimentation, a strategic target, and a provider of warriors for the Right, Left, and center" (Stimpson, Summer 2002, 36). Higher education mattered because "it maintains and produces...intellectual capital and because it recruits and trains human capital, including a national and international elite" (Stimpson, Summer 2002, 36).⁶ Within higher education, the humanities were a primary battleground—in part because they had so aggressively raised questions about the nature of the United States, race, gender, and sexual norms; in part because they are the disciplines that teach culture, concepts of truth and identity, theories of the beautiful, and values; and, in part, because, like the arts, they are economically vulnerable. Although the culture wars brought the humanities publicity and brought out the warrior spirit in many humanists, they also made the humanities even more defensive.

Two publishing events, both in 1996, crystallize for me the humanities mess and its implications for higher education and, thus, graduate education. One gave form to doubts about the contemporary humanities that had been voiced both from without and within; a second gave form to doubts about the humanities that had been voiced largely from within. The first is the so-called Sokal Affair. The Spring-Summer 1996 issue of *Social Text*, a journal associated with the academic left, taking as its theme the "Science Wars," published an article by Alan Sokal, a member of the Physics Department of New York University, with the deliberately mind-numbing title, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity." Initially welcomed as a contribution by a "real" scientist who understood how the up-to-date, post-modern, interpretative humanities could penetrate science and deflate its claims to epistemic superiority, "Transgressing" was then revealed to be a hoax, a pastiche of post-modern authorities designed to show how ridiculous and dangerous their thought and jargonish language was, how fallible their advocates were, and how wrong these advocates were to assert that they knew anything about science. The Sokal Affair took on the dimensions of a scandal and of yet another chapter in the culture wars, resonating within academic life, the mass media, and the Internet. John Guillory writes of the consequences of Sokal's gambit for the literary academy and other "humanistically oriented enterprises": "public ignominy"; being construed as left-wing, politicized, and oh so politically correct; being demonized as denying the presence of "reality" and asserting that all is "socially constructed" (473-4). Look, some strong voices within the humanities said, among them philosophers, this is what happens when you get slack, when you don't know what you're talking about. And who, asked other commentators, largely outside of the academy, who would pay for their child to study such garbage?

The second event was the posthumous publication of *The University in Ruins* by Bill Readings, which has circulated through the United States humanities as a sophisticated explanation of their trauma and unhappiness. I find the book an example of romantic and apocalyptic thought, which squeezes much of the complexity out of history and inflates a picture of the sensitive,

⁶ Stimpson October 2000 and Stimpson Spring/Summer 1993 are among my other explorations of education and the humanities.

solitary soul in the wilderness, but some of our finest humanists accept it. I think of J. Hillis Miller, a literary scholar and critic of learning, subtlety, and great probity. His essay, "Literary and Cultural Studies in the Transnational University," paraphrases and ornaments Readings' argument that the university is changing radically. "Something drastic is happening in the university. Something drastic is happening to the university. The university is losing its idea, the guiding mission that has sustained it since the early nineteenth century" (Miller, 45). It was to serve the nation-state by being the site of critical thinking and research (*Wissenschaft*) and a site of education (*Bildung*), forming the subjects of the state through philosophy or, in Anglo-Saxon countries, through literature. However, the state is now weakening, giving way to global economic and cultural systems. University training is being placed in the service of "transnational corporations" (45). Funders no longer believe that the nation needs the old university as it once did; the new university no longer needs the humanities as it once did. As for humanists, they have become unreliable conveyors of whatever values a nation has left. "The cat," Miller writes, "is out of the bag. These academic bureaucrats and legislators are by no means stupid...they know...that you can no longer trust professors to teach Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and the rest in the old ideological ways" (53).

Also reshaping the humanities are still more profound shifts. Correctly, Miller notes that the United States has become a multicultural, multilingual nation. No single work reflects this "complex, nonunifiable whole" (55). The new communications technologies—computers, e-mail, fax, videos, CD-ROMS, hypertext, the Internet—are altering the way "humanist scholars are related to one another and do their work" (50). Moreover, around 1980, a generation of university teachers and critics appeared who had been brought up with television and "new forms of commercialized popular music." They turned "spontaneously and...massively to cultural studies," reflecting a move from the "age of the book to the age of hypertext" (60-1).

Some of what Miller proposes is true; some, like the obituary for the nation-state, is exaggerated. But if Readings and Miller are right, what are graduate programs in the humanities to do? They are to seek a university rooted in "respect rather than of knowledge, one based on dissensus rather than the search for consensus...and a universalized truth" (64). If a more corporate transnational university prevails, the struggle for the humanities will be to keep from "becoming vestigial, no more than an assembly of programs teaching the communication skills needed by educated technocrats in the service of transnational corporations" (65). Miller offers no road map for building the university of dissensus, or for the more despairing struggle against the corporate transnational university. Instead, like Readings, he represents the world sweepingly, and sketches an ethical position for the humanities that might serve as consolation for their plight.

In the midst of the culture wars, I once heard a leading humanist shout out, "We have no power, but we will tell truth to power." His sloganeering was more militant and aspirational than the encouragement to dwell respectfully and honestly in the ruins, but I find them both symptoms of an incomplete response to the mess of the humanities—too passive, too enthralled by alienation, too confined to the humanities as a site of analysis and critique rather than as a site of analysis, critique, and affirmation. The humanities are hardly an activity that encourages only the Little Mary Sunshines of any gender to enroll in graduate school. They have rarely done so. They have appealed to old fogeys and young cranks, to the shy fantasist and the dawdling escapist, to the acerbic and the cruel, to the passive aggressive and manic depressive.

However, when compelling, the humanities have the strength to dissipate the confusing messes in which they are enmeshed. The most revered and formidable of humanistic texts and humanists shatter the bricks of our complacency and the glass of our most benevolent certitudes. They can also blast through the most heavily titanium-and-steel reinforced chambers of our indifferent minds and hearts, and lead us to new worlds. What compels these texts and people? A passion for the subject is one thing. At a graduate school dean's day, at the turn of the millennium, I heard one of the leading medievalists of her generation say, "I teach Chaucer. Nobody could be a deader white male. I love him, and my students learn to read and like him." Another is an irrepressible passion for learning itself. In 1998, Yi-Fu Tuan, who describes his field as systematic human geography, outlined his intellectual autobiography:

I have always wondered ... perhaps to a neurotic degree, about the meaning of existence: I want to know what we are doing here, what we want out of life. Big questions of this kind, which occur to most children as they approach puberty, have never left me...My almost pathological need to find meaning presses me to ask, again, and again, What else is there? What goes beyond – even far beyond – coping and survival (Tuan, 3).

The survival of the humanities depends upon its ability to prove that survival entails going beyond survival.

THE UNITY OF THE HUMANITIES

The messy humanities are not a discipline but a set of disciplines that apparently have no unifying method whatsoever. I remember the meetings of leaders of the humanities departments and programs that my co-acting humanities dean, a classicist, and I once facilitated. There was the logician, there the creative writer, there an ethnographer of new technologies, there a European historian, there the global historian, there the critic of Latin American literature, there the friend of Jacques Derrida, there the enemy. Some were more akin to the sciences or to the social sciences than others were. Possibly, this messiness, this lack of disciplinary purity, is a vital sign of the messiness of our human lives themselves. Except for the most obsessive and regulatory of academics, very few of us spend every iota of our ordinary lives within the borders of the academic disciplines. But how can one talk seriously and comprehensively about "what constitutes knowledge and understanding in the humanities?" Is it possible to talk seriously and comprehensively about what humanists know and how they know it? Possibly not, but humanists have to try and give a plausible account of what it means to be a humanist – no matter what the specific discipline or area within a discipline or method. If we cannot generate even a minimal description of the humanities, they will dissipate into vapors, and graduate education in the humanities will have no common bonds except that anxious sense of institutional marginality. If there are the always inevitable conflicts about the meaning of the humanities, we must follow Gerald Graff's now canonical and binding injunction, "Teach the conflict."

Two gravitational forces pull contemporary humanists together. One is a loose commitment to a particular method. Some humanists do rigorously formal work and now computer-aided work. A philosopher thinks through a problem in logic; a musicologist analyzes a Bach fugue or a Beethoven symphony. However, humanists do not base their work in mathematics, nor do they

design laboratory experiments that can be replicated.⁷ Humanists offer other forms of evidence to persuade their audience that they are reliable, that they are plausible, that they ought to be believed. One is the *extent and depth* of their awareness of the materials relevant to their inquiry--the appropriate archives, texts, historical developments, languages, works of art and architecture, cultural institutions, and conflicts. I am far more apt to trust a critic of contemporary Egyptian literature if he or she knows Arabic, English, and French, or, at the very least, Arabic. A second is the *quality of sensibility*, how subtle and original, how capable of creating a spacious argument or narrative and yet of doing finely-textured analyses. A third form of evidence interweaves awareness of materials and sensibility, *the capacity for interpretation*.

John Guillory rightly laments the current interpretations of interpretation in the academy. Either it has been downgraded to a species of mere opinion, or, alternatively, it "has been reconceived as an instrument for the skeptical critique of knowledge-claims." Simultaneously, and unfortunately, some of the humanistic disciplines have become a kind of theology, "allegoriz(ing)" the disciplines as representatives of "inherent political or philosophical positions" (505). To put the matter more vulgarly than Guillory does, if the humanities are interpretative activities, they are in trouble because of what interpretation now means, either one person blowing off mental steam, or, alternatively, biased humanists pushing a position, or, still another alternative, a skeptic warning that what other people say is false rather than exploring the true. Certainly, in an age of massive globally distributed propaganda and sales pitches, skepticism is invaluable, but, Guillory reminds us, interpretation is also a means of "producing knowledge" (498). The humanities will produce knowledge most effectively when they conceive of themselves as an interpretative "human science," bridging both naturalistic and interpretative methodologies. Which discipline might be the strongest bridge? For Guillory, it is history. Like Guillory, I assign philosophy the task of providing oversight for the epistemological claims of the other disciplines.

The second gravitational force is the subject matter of the humanities: the activities of human beings. Significantly, each humanistic discipline either represents a human capacity performing at the highest level of complexity, or, alternately, studies a human capacity performing at both its most routine and at its highest level of complexity. So philosophy represents our capacity for thinking at its most complex, history our capacity for remembering at its most complex. So, in its way, does psychoanalysis. Alternately, literary criticism studies us as language-makers at both our most routine and our most complex; art history studies us as picture-makers at both our most routine and our most complex; musicology studies us as sound-makers at both our most routine and our most complex; ethics studies us as just and moral beings, again at both our most routine and our most complex. Being a humanist is to be constantly torn between admiration and horror at human activities, between being in the presence of the ethics of the New Testament and the tortures of the Inquisition made in the name of the New Testament. The array of fundamentally influential decisions about the very meaning of being human,

⁷ Professor Jeffrey Schnapp at Stanford has implemented the pilot phase of a model of research in the humanities that is based on the MIT Media Research Lab and others. The Stanford Humanities Lab is an independent entity within the university, it funds competitively selected collaborative research projects that involve faculty, postdoctoral students, graduate students, and others from across the university, such as from the library or arts centers. See <http://www.stanford.edu/group/shl>.

which we have created, also provokes both admiration and horror. They have fluctuated radically over time and vary from culture to culture. These are such "duh" comments that I hesitate to write them.

Today, many humanists describe our condition as "posthuman."⁸ This term means that one Western definition of humanity, common since the early modern period, is breaking down, in great part under the pressure of modern technologies. Human beings were named as one of two poles in a set of binary oppositions, and by far the better of the two. We were human, not animals; we were human, not machines. However, these oppositions are now collapsing. The strict borders between human and animal, between human and machine are being erased. What is the difference between human and animal if we can exchange body parts? What is the difference between human and machine if the mind and a computer might replicate each other? Or if I might have a computer chip implanted in my eye or brain? The humanities, in league with the sciences, take on these questions.

However, humanists have to choose a moral as well as a disciplinary perspective as they do their work. Ardent nationalists—from the United States and elsewhere—argue that the task of the humanities is to burnish the values and achievements of a national culture. They have their parallels in various religious and ethnic groups. However, the perspective that is most apt for a pluralistic, multi-cultured world—so aware of its global ties, its localisms, and their relations—is less particularistic and far more spacious and generous. For me, it derives from anthropology, the discipline whose dictionary definition is the science or study of man. Clifford Geertz, one of the greatest of contemporary humanistic scholars, writes of a triple task of seeing: first seeing others, then of seeing ourselves as others see us, and finally of seeing ourselves among others. Geertz writes:

To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes. If interpretative anthropology has any general office in the world it is to keep reteaching this fugitive truth. ("Introduction" to *Local Knowledge*, 16).

If humanists can achieve this "largeness of mind," we may, I believe, even achieve a common picture of what being human means. I again turn to Geertz. In his famous essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture," he offers all humanists, not just anthropologists, such a picture. "... [M]an," he writes, "is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun." Culture is "those webs, and the analysis of it [is] ... therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning" (5). What Geertz calls "cultural analysis" I take to be the work of the humanities. It investigates "the symbolic dimensions of social action—art, religion, ideology, science, law, morality, common sense." However, we spin away in a world that consists not only of symbols, but also of social structures and natural necessities. Cultural analysis cannot lose touch "with the hard surfaces of life—with the political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere

⁸ See, for example, the work of N. Katherine Hayles.

contained – and with the biological and physical necessities on which those surfaces rest ...” (30) Acting in this way, we in the humanities will “plunge into the midst” of our “existential dilemmas” (30).

Word-conscious humanists, inside or outside of graduate schools, will chew over that metaphor of man as “an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.” In part, it is a posthuman reminder of connections between humanity and animalism, a truth many cultures have already known. In part, it embodies a contradiction, and contradictoriness is as much a part of being human as our desire to construct and construe laws. On the one hand, being suspended in a web of significance is frightening; we are prisoners hanging over a void. On the other hand, spinning webs is the task of the spider, naturalistically one of the four main arachnid orders, but mythically quite a creature. The narratives of Greek mythology tell of Arachne, a great weaver, who had the temerity to challenge the mighty goddess Athena. At once wise and tumultuous, Athena transformed Arachne into a spider. She continued to weave, a symbol of the persistence of creativity. Many centuries later, E. B. White, in his children’s book *Charlotte’s Web*, re-invented her as Charlotte, a wily and kind old spider, aware of the terrible fragility of webs, and in her communities of people and insects and beasts, a source and sign of wisdom itself.⁹

To be a humanist: to seek to understand, to interpret, and to teach our webs, world-wide and in the dustiest corners of a village in the dunes of the past.

WORDS ABOUT RESPONSIBILITIES AND STEWARDSHIP IN THE HUMANITIES

Stewardship in the humanities: after April, 2003, no-one can think about “stewardship in the humanities” without grief and bitterness. For we then witnessed the rampaging through the National Museum in Baghdad, the Iraqi National Library and archives, the Mosul museum. The deepest of human histories have been burnt, smashed, looted, and robbed. We have lost irreplaceable records of the birth of writing, agriculture, law, religion, the state. Everyone living today is a descendent of the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia. We can assign blame for our losses to organized rings of thieves and their markets, anonymous looters, remnants of a tyrant’s regime, and to the United States government. They will – or, more probably will not – accept legal and moral responsibility. Even the most contrite acknowledgement of culpability will not bring art, history, and books back. They are gone and with them, our heritage. Of the paltry, paltry good that might come from this colossal disaster is a sharper awareness of what we pillage when we refuse to steward the humanities – nothing less than ourselves.

Being a steward means embodying a profound concept and doing often mundane tasks. Etymologically rooted in Old English, the word first referred to the person who regulated a household and supervised the table. The association of stewardship and eating has persisted, even as stewards took on responsibilities for management of land and in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, for judicial duties. Although a steward is neither a titan nor a queen nor a president, he or she is responsible for central aspects of our well-being. Not surprisingly, given the decentralization of culture and education in the United States, the stewards of the messes in the humanities are dispersed. No single institution authoritatively speaks for the

⁹ Nancy K. Miller, “Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic,” uses the figure of Arachne as a trope for a feminist poetics.

humanities as a whole, although some have national scope and significance. I think, for example, of the National Humanities Center in North Carolina; the American Council of Learned Societies, the umbrella organization for many disciplinary societies; the American Academy of Arts and Science, an American version of the European academies that have been a primary conduit of humanistic learning since the early modern period; and Phi Beta Kappa, an honorary society of liberal arts baccalaureates that sponsors a significant magazine, *The American Scholar*. Fortunately, this diffusion prevents the sclerosis from which overly centralized institutions suffer. Less fortunately, it means the humanities lack a greatly powerful champion and advocate, and a voice that can clarify the contests and arguments that give the humanities their zest, salt, rawness, and flavors.

Some of the stewards are individual voices: figures who have the talent and force to set new directions in the humanities; accomplished leaders from the private sector who give moral and philanthropic support; or singular creators who have earned the public trust. Like Bill Moyers, who appears largely on public television and publishes with trade houses, these figures often work outside of academic life. This is ironic, because the institutions most responsible for the humanities are academic ones—universities and liberal arts colleges. Like all of American higher education, they are both public and private. They support research, hire humanists for their faculties, standardize the humanities through setting the curriculum, maintain research libraries, educate the next generation of professional humanists in graduate schools, disseminate the humanities in the undergraduate classroom, create humanities centers (a healthy development in the last part of the 20th century), and operate the university presses that have been a primary outlet for academic monographs. Higher education has been the primary life support system for the humanities, and this is almost wholly to the good. The gap between writing “almost wholly” and “wholly” exists because the humanities are saturated with the identity of higher education, its bureaucratic structures and its processes of evaluation. A brilliant young humanist might not say, “I am a humanist and want to write as passionately and coherently as possible about the history of the American West,” but rather, this humanist might say, “I am a historian, and I have to finish my second book about this border town in Nevada so I can pass muster with my department and get tenure.”¹⁰

Traditionally, stewards of the disciplines have judged newer academic humanists—the extent and breadth of their awareness of relevant materials, the quality of their sensibility, and their capacity for productive interpretation—through their publication of a book or monograph. This remains the standard for tenure in research universities and, usually, for a solid reputation. Today, however, several forces are putting pressure on this standard. The first, paradoxically, is the demand for books for tenure in institutions other than research universities. This has led too often to quick, thin books read by only a handful of people and usually without much influence. Simultaneously, the economics of scholarly publishing are now perilous. The outlets for academic books are diminishing, threatening the good and the indifferent alike. Finally, digital technologies are changing the dissemination of information and knowledge. The humanities should be following the sciences in establishing “more inclusive networks of intellectual dialogue [and] ... open archives” (Lewis, 1224). The open but urgent question is how to

¹⁰ The Association of American Universities (AAU), the organization of leading research universities, is preparing a report about humanities on their campuses, which demonstrates far more vitality and innovation than one might have thought from gloomier accounts of the on-going crisis in the humanities.

evaluate a humanist's work if scholarly articles are to supplement the monograph, if a range of rhetorical styles is to become more acceptable, and if more publishing is to be done electronically.

Powerful though higher education institutions are, they are not self-sustaining. They exist within a number of networks on which they feed and which, in turn, feed on them. Some of these are the "disciplinary organizations," such as the American Historical Association and the Modern Language Association. Consisting primarily of faculty members and research scholars, with some graduate student participation, they define the problems of a discipline as a whole and establish its protocols. Their flagship journals set the norms and parameters of accepted scholarship (Tomlins). Educational institutions concerned with the liberal arts form their own associations and affinity groups. Private foundations, such as the crucial Mellon Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, fund projects and, through fellowships, individual scholars. Great private research libraries—the New York Public Library, the Newberry Library in Chicago, the Huntington Library in Pasadena—are invaluable repositories of manuscripts, maps, books. Independent academies provide a home for advanced inquiry.¹¹ To a degree that many academic scholars refuse to acknowledge, public broadcasting brings humanistic scholarship—especially in literature, drama, and history—to a wide public. The websites for such programs as Masterpiece Theatre on PBS would put many a college classroom and its syllabi to shame.¹²

Notably, federal and state governments are minor, often reluctant stewards of the humanities. In 1965, Congress authorized two organizations that were to support the arts and the humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Each endowment was to help support state councils, which have been extraordinarily creative in invigorating the arts and humanities on a local level, in bringing together academic humanists and non-academic audiences, and in inspiring the public humanities movement, self-conscious efforts to weave the humanities with the life of American citizens. Each endowment can correctly claim a record of achievement, but they have never attained the status as stewards that the National Science Foundation, their model, has for the sciences. The endowments have been too small, too underfunded, their ability to underwrite such major "traditional" projects as the publication of the papers of important cultural and political figures too skimpy. They have also been a battleground of the culture wars, their more liberal activities subject to vitriol, scorn, ridicule, and charges of America-hating. Their more conservative activities, on the other hand, have been subject to deep suspicion and charges of liberal-hating. It is far better to have the endowments than not to have them at all, but their lamentable vulnerability to political pressures renders their record of stewardship erratic.

In addition, and often unrecognized by the formal stewards of the humanities, are informal stewards and practitioners of humanistic inquiry. They may partake of the self-conscious public humanities movement, but they are far greater in number than these worthies. They simply do

¹¹ The American Academy of Arts and Science is responsible for one of the most important recent reports about the humanities, focusing on its data needs, "Making the Humanities Count" (Solow, et al.)

¹² The culture wars generated two mutually compatible private organizations: the National Association of Scholars and the American Council of Alumni and Trustees, the common purpose of which is to label and combat the putative radicalism and "politicalization" of the liberal arts and their institutions.

the humanities in their everyday life. They include the man or woman looking up a family genealogy; the members of a book club or discussion group; the audience of a state humanities council project; a listener to jazz who compares performances he or she has heard; or the solitary reader of a book of history or poetry. I once scoffed at people who, when they were introduced to a professional philosopher, would say, "I have a philosophy of life," but my laughter was cheap and superficial. A person with a philosophy of life has been a practical humanist, has thought teleologically and ethically.

To be sure, the individuals and institutions that formally support the humanities need more coordination, and more facilitators who might help them network more effectively. (My use of bureaucratic jargon is ironic.) The purpose of a more coherently organized stewardship would be to make a powerful and public case for the humanities and greater funding for them. If it came to be, such a stewardship could measure its success quantitatively. Were there more fellowships for scholars? Was the NEH more immune from political posturing? A second test would be harder to design, but would be as important. Would the informal stewards and practitioners have become a part of a national effort at stewardship? Would they be recognized as stewards? Would the members of the book club in my hometown feel as responsible for the humanities, and as much in debt to them, as the English Department of the local university?

QUESTIONS FOR GRADUATE PROGRAMS IN THE HUMANITIES¹³

Early in this essay I remarked that the hands of graduate educators in the humanities are plunged deeply into the mess, for they are engaged in the work of the humanities as well as the training of the next generation of humanists. This training is a primary form of stewardship and responsibility. It can be conducted carelessly, routinely, or in a spirit of self-consciousness and self-questioning. Significantly, humanists pride themselves on their capacity for asking questions, for probing and anatomizing, for pushing aside formulaic, conventional, superficial answers. What questions should graduate educators in the humanities now ask themselves?

The most crucial question, of course, is "Why?" "Why are we recruiting, admitting, and educating doctoral students?" Perhaps some answers will be too selfish or cutely playful to be widely distributed. Perhaps some answers will be too fatuous even for a "mission statement," that fast food purveyor of the fatuous. However, unless a program can cogently say why it exists, others will ask why it must.

I have six more platters of questions for graduate programs. I believe they are vital queries, but because of the wide circulation of ideas about reform in graduate education, they are hardly *nouvelle*. Their pragmatism also would have surprised me when I was an idealistic graduate student too out-of-touch to realize how wet I was behind the ears.

First, who should the next generation of graduate students in the humanities be? What demonstrable talents should they have? And how diverse should they be? And, if we believe in

¹³ After outlining this section, I attended a conference on "The Future of Criticism" at the University of Chicago, sponsored by Critical Inquiry, one of the liveliest and most consequential of humanities and social science journals. Conference participants were asked to submit statements that briefly reflected their perception of the future of theory and criticism. Several of these statements overlap with some of my ideas now and can be accessed at the CI website www.uchicago.edu/research/jnl-crit-inq/main.html My essay, "Myths of Transformation: Realities of Change" also outlines five principles that I believe ought to serve as a foundation for all graduate education.

diversity, nationally and internationally, as I do, how will we achieve it? However active graduate schools may now be in recruiting students from undergraduate colleges, they do far too little in reaching a broad range of high school students and their families. As Lynn Hunt writes, humanities faculties have failed to make their case "especially to students from families in which the parents did not go to college" (Hunt, 9).

Second, once students are within programs, how do we want them to learn and what do we want them to know? A graduate degree, an economist keeps telling me, is a research degree. But what, in an age of information overload, does this mean? And is research to be deep but narrow or broad but shallow? This question may set up a false binary opposition, but it points to a hard issue, "Is graduate education disciplinary or interdisciplinary?" Interdisciplinarity has become a fetish and a touchstone, but no-one can do interdisciplinary work well unless they have a home plate of knowledge from which they can run and to which they can return. A little learning is a dangerous thing. Graduate school both trains one's general intellectual capacities and nurtures a specialization, a strong understanding of something. Graduate education should not be a smattering of this and that. Although Marjorie Sabin is more hostile to contemporary theory than I, she has a point when she writes of:

Young literary scholars ... cruelly caught between the pressure to rush into print with their amateur forays into economics, psychology, anthropology, and so forth and their need – possibly even their desire – to advance their reading of literature beyond its undergraduate limits. The students of this poorly educated faculty, in turn, will be inevitably deprived of the literary experience necessary to test the hostility to literature promulgated by much advanced theory (Sabin, 98).

Yet, graduate education must cultivate curiosity and the ability, which curiosity waters, to make connections between a specialty and other fields. These connections are the lines that make up the webs of interdisciplinary work. Graduate students must become suspicious of the mere evocation of the term – as if it were a prayer. They must be able to grasp what this work entails, which begins with the ability to understand one's own disciplinary roots and explain them to others. Students must also learn how many different ways there are of being interdisciplinary.¹⁴ Is not one way of achieving this end a common course in a doctoral student's first year, what I have called "general education for graduate education" (Stimpson, "General Education for Graduate Education"). A shared intellectual experience would introduce graduate students – diverse in nationality, background, discipline, language, and training – to each other, to their intellectual homes, and to the university.

Third, organizationally, do the structures into which graduate students are admitted enable genuine learning with a flexible mixture of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches? Catherine Gallagher speculates that we may be in the midst of "an enormous institutional shift away from the traditional departments even though we continue to locate our professional training inside those structures. Perhaps our most difficult task now is to give our intellectual adventures the kind of secure institutional footing that would allow us to development once again as a discipline" (152). The life sciences display a similar disjunction between departmental

¹⁴ For two different perspectives, see Renato Rosaldo and Mary Poovey.

structures and the sites where research and teaching are actually being done, which results in an overlay of interdisciplinary programs over departmental structures.

If humanities departments were to be re-aligned, which would join with which? What might be peeled off and discarded? And would the social sciences need to be split between the "narrativizing" or "discursive" fields and the more quantitative and mathematical? So, would political theory split off from politics, cultural anthropology from anthropology, and such subfields as historical sociology and sociology of culture from sociology? Would they and the humanities then drift towards each other and form a new academic continent with new contours? This would not happen at once, an Instant Transformation, but take place incrementally over time. Slowly, graduate students would enter institutions in which closer fit would exist between departments and our "intellectual adventures."¹⁵

Fourth, how are we to create academic citizens, members of a public? Intellectually, humanists have tended to work by themselves. The heroic and original humanist has been a solitary one. To be sure, humanists have had friends, spouses, partners, and assistants. They have spoken about their work in classrooms and conferences. But, significantly, their publications have tended to bear only their name. Collaborative practices, common to the sciences, must now take hold in the humanities.¹⁶ It can be done within a field, or among fields, or among arts and sciences and the professions. Medical anthropology and law and literature are but two examples of these fusions. Collaborations are increasing because good interdisciplinary work so often demands collaboration, because the dramatic increase in knowledge makes it difficult for one person to master a field independently, and because of the long overdue recognition that much intellectual and artistic work is communal in nature. Some grand, formidable polymath geniuses do exist. I think, for example, of Susan Sontag in criticism and the arts, and the late Stephen J. Gould in the sciences. I would not want to force such minds into enforced companionships and false group signatures. For others, be they as brilliant as Sontag and Gould or not, should graduate programs not encourage collaborative as well as independent work? Research and teaching can be a potlatch as well as a table set by and for one.

Another meaning of participation is being involved in governance. How can we train graduate students in fair, effective, transparent governance? The refusal or inability to become genuinely engaged in governance, and the habit of substituting rhetorical outcries for the work of governance, helps to guarantee the marginality of humanists. To do governance means enrolling in rudimentary lessons about budgets instead of complaining, "I'm not quantitative"; doing competent administrative work beyond the department instead of enforcing a victim's distance between "us," the humanists, and "them," the administrators.

Fifth, after the doctoral defense is over, what do we want our students to do and be? As scores before me have pointed out, doctorates in the humanities will need decent employment. If they are going to become teachers, and most will, they will need to know how to design a curriculum both on-site and on-line, how to transform research into a cogent, appealing teachable subject

¹⁵ See the forthcoming article by Immanuel Wallerstein, "Anthropology/Sociology and Other Dubious Disciplines," in *Current Anthropology*.

¹⁶ A good description of the possibilities of collaborative work is in the essays that derive from the 2000 Presidential Forum of the Modern Language Association organized by Linda Hutcheon, then the MLA president. See "Presidential Forum."

for students at many different levels.¹⁷ How are we preparing them? Graduate students will need to be reassured that a variety of jobs will be appropriate outside of the research university—be they in other educational institutions or outside of academe altogether. How are we telling our students that they are not failures if they do not become a clone of their dissertation adviser? In a compelling autobiographical essay about her discoveries after the only job she could get was in a two-year institution, Jennifer W. Stolpa concludes,

... we should examine carefully how long-standing assumptions about two-year institutions may prevent people from considering such positions as professionally sound choices. As I hear of my graduate school colleagues finishing their doctorates and entering the job market, I hope they too will confront the assumptions they may hold about two-year institutions. I know I am better for having done so (91).

How are we speaking to a Dr. Stolpa and, as we do so, tamping down a pernicious elitism about institutions? Realistically, we also know that some educational institutions are wretched, academically remote, governed by timeservers and petty-minded control freaks. How are graduate institutions connecting with our graduates who do hard duty in such places conscientiously?

Sixth and finally, how are graduate programs modeling the appropriate relations between traditional learning and its new technologies that are transforming the ways in which we read, write, and learn, or, as Carla Hesse writes, the "foundational assumptions of the humanities and the nature of the libraries that sustain them." Computer scientists can teach the humanities about these new technologies. Neuroscientists and psychologists can teach humanists more about the processes of perception and cognition. Sociologists can teach humanists about our social adaptation and use of the new technologies. Humanists can remind themselves and teach others about the rhetorical nature of learning. What sort of a hybrid will we, so educated, generate from the encounters between tradition and the new? "It is not insignificant," Hesse argues, "...that at the heart of the Xerox Corporation's Palo Alto Research Center—the birthplace of the mouse—there lies a traditional library composed of tables and chairs, as well as books and serial stacks, so that researchers can engage in long, silent reading and reflection on where they are going and what they are doing" (Hesse, 119).¹⁸

No doubt, current and subsequent generations of graduate students, who were born with a mouse in their hands, will create this hybrid far more imaginatively and useful than my generation. But all of our efforts will be full of mistakes. Some of our hybrids may be misshapen. How will we do what we must ably and imaginatively?

CLOSING WORDS

My essay began with a comment about the doubtfulness of the word "mess," accusing the humanities of being a mess in the more pejorative of the two senses and praising them for being a mess in the more affirmative. I also worried that the humanities in the United States had

¹⁷ Peter N. Stearns speaks forcefully to the need for a revitalized humanities, especially history, that takes its curricular responsibilities seriously.

¹⁸ The literature on this subject is growing, but the work of Jerome McGann and Richard A. Lanham has been especially helpful to me. See, for example, Lanham in Gless and Herrnstein Smith.

dismissed or forgotten about the affirmative meaning of the humanities, had become defensive and obsessed with their marginality. Let me end by returning to the reasons why the humanities matter. I take them from the recent publications of an Iranian literary scholar, Azar Nafisi, who now lives and teaches in the United States. During a mess of historic proportions—the Iranian revolution, the installation of a theocracy there, the Iranian-Iraqi war—she taught literature. Belonging to a tradition of humanists and artists who have worked while literally under siege and fire, she writes, "...it is precisely during such times, when our lives are transformed by violence, that we need works of imagination to confirm our faith in humanity, to find hope amid the rubble of a hopeless world" ("Words of War," A25). Humanists in American graduate schools, as teachers or students, may experience economic anxieties and political alienation. Even so, they can do no less to affirm the humanities than their colleagues who are in greater peril, whose breath and life are in danger, and who continue to speak with great ardor and persuasiveness of the worth of humanistic activities and learning.

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